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## SEXUAL HARASSMENT: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT.** *We critically review the published research on sexual harassment. Definitional, epidemiological, etiological, treatment, and prevention issues are examined as well as the literature on the effects of sexual harassment. Suggestions for future research are provided. Although there are many controversies concerning the definition of sexual harassment, it is clear that there are subtypes of sexual harassment, such as gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Existing research indicates that sexual harassment is a frequent form of victimization of women, affecting around half of all women, with verbal harassment being more common than nonverbal harassment. It appears common for sexual harassment victims to experience negative psychological, occupational, and economic consequences, although prospective research utilizing valid and comprehensive assessment methods needs to be conducted. Little is known about the etiology of sexual harassment, although models that take into account organizational and individual variables seem to account for more of the variance. Treatment of victims and harassers is hampered by a lack of treatment outcome research. Suggestions for future research are provided. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd*

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ALTHOUGH WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS played a large and important role in the workforce, in the last few decades more and more women are working outside the home (Powell, 1988). These new economic opportunities are important to females and their dependents,

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as working outside the home is typically associated with higher wages and significantly improved benefits (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1992). Beyond these financial benefits, a satisfactory employment situation provides a number of important psychological benefits, such as good self-esteem, feelings of accomplishment, and social support networks (Powell, 1988). Thus, threats to a satisfactory job are also threats to a source of a number of very important benefits.

Women experience a variety of problems in the workplace. Discrimination has resulted in hiring biases, reduced wages (the well-known 70 cents on the male dollar), as well as barriers to advancement (the also well-known "glass ceiling"; Davidson & Cooper, 1992). An important work-related problem is sexual harassment. There are data indicating that females experience a significant risk for sexual abuse as children (Salter, 1993) and as adults in the form of rape (Russell, 1984). Unfortunately females' risk for being sexually victimized does not appear to be eliminated when women are working. In the present paper, the authors will review and summarize several aspects of the sexual harassment literature. These will include definitional issues, theoretical models and etiology, characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and various treatment approaches and their potential effectiveness.

### THE DEFINITION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Proper definitions are important to a field of study because they specify the substance of the field by providing indications regarding what should be included and what should be excluded. Operational definitions become especially critical because of the central role of measurement to a field. Beyond their scientific functions definitions have practical import. Definitions can serve as guidelines to determine if some particular case fits under some more general rubric.

Definitions of sexual harassment agree on only one semantic issue: that sexual harassment is improper behavior that has a sexual dimension. In short, sexual harassment, like most psychological constructs, has been difficult to define. The various definitions disagree on: (a) whether a power differential is necessary for sexual harassment to occur; (b) whether a location needs to be specified (e.g., the workplace); (c) the importance placed on whether the victim perceives the behavior as problematic; (d) whether only women can be sexually harassed; (e) whether an act can be defined as harassing in and of itself or whether further negative consequences are necessary for the act to be a legitimate case of sexual harassment; and (f) whether sexist (e.g., "gender harassment" as opposed to sexual) behavior is a type of sexual harassment.

Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley (1997) argue that a distinction needs to be made between *legal* definitions of sexual harassment and *psychological* definitions. Legal definitions are more narrow, depend on criteria that are external to the victim, and evolve based on legal statutes, case law, appellate decisions, and regulatory definitions. Psychological definitions, in contrast, focus on the victim's experience. Fitzgerald et al. (1997) define psychological sexual harassment as "An unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources or threatening her well-being" (p. 20). Moreover, they suggest that the victim's appraisal is determined by stimulus factors (having to do with the behavior itself), contextual factors (having to do with the organization context in which the behavior takes place); and individual factors (having to do with the individual woman).

Given these definitional difficulties, the question then becomes: What is a good definition of sexual harassment? It is our position that at this early point in the development of the field it is too early to tell. Methodologically, it is important for researchers to recognize these

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